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SUBJECT: MINORITIES COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCE PLANNING, WHAT
IRAQ'S CHRISTIANS REALLY WANT

Classified By: By Political Counselor Robert S. Ford for reasons 1.4(b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: While there is general consensus among Iraq's Christians on economic and cultural issues requiring ameliorative GoI action (e.g., de-Islamicising the national educational curriculum and removing religious identification from national ID cards), the community is divided on political goals, such as the utility of Christian autonomous zones. Top Christians in the Iraqi government are slowly developing an action plan to advance shared Christian economic and cultural objectives. Meanwhile, the MFA is in the early stages of organizing a conference to address Christian issues. We have in the past two weeks been discussing with Iraqi contacts in and out of government how to advance a program that would start addressing the real problems the Christian community here faces. Our Christian GoI interlocutors all agree that a minorities conference visibly funded or organized by the USG and held in the U.S. would not be helpful to Iraq's Christians. We are exploring how to prod the Iraqi government forward with organizing a conference on one track, while we encourage a committee led by Christian ministers in the cabinet to develop an agenda broadly agreed among the Christian community here that such a conference could promote. End summary.

Advancing the Christian Agenda

¶2. (C) In an August 29 meeting with poloffs, which Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Salim also attended, Minister of Industry (and PM Minorities Committee Head) Fawzi Hariri stressed that economic development was essential to stem the exodus of Christians from Iraq. He said there needs to be increased investment (and thus job creation) in Christian areas, better health care and other services, and an end to job discrimination against Christians. Hariri advocated the establishment of employment quotas for the Iraqi public sector to ensure equitable Christian representation in the work force. The quotas he envisions would include the military and police, and would emphasize adequate senior-level jobs for Christians to ensure lower-level Christian employment. He also noted the need to improve transparency and oversight in budget execution and disbursements in local councils that administer Christian areas ensure that all communities are being served and funded fairly.

¶3. (C) Salim flagged several issues of cultural concern to Iraq's Christian community. For example, the Iraqi identification card still specifies the religion of its holder. She said that not only does this make it easier to discriminate against Christians, but Iraqi Jews are afraid to apply for jobs and services out of fear that their identification as Jews may jeopardize their safety. She also complained that the Ministry of Education has de-Ba'athified but also Islamicized the national educational curriculum. Where in the past selections from classical Arabic poetry were used to teach grammar and style, now examples are drawn

from the Quran. She said that even mathematics text books are Islamicized by word problems based on precepts of Islamic law like inheritance.

14. (C) Both Hariri and Salim agreed that Iraq's Christian community is politically divided, with rifts between sects, between leaders and laity, and between members in the diaspora and those living in Iraq. Christian political and religious leaders do not have a common agenda. Some Iraqi Christians support the idea of Christian autonomous zones, but others view this as harmful. Hariri acknowledged that his desire for a five to seven percent Christian quota for Council of Representatives and provincial councils was controversial.

15. (C) PolMinCouns noted the utility when lobbying the Iraqi government of broad agreement among the Christian community upon a set of economic and political objectives. He suggested that Hariri and Salim, both Christians and members of the Prime Minister's Minorities Committee, work with community leaders to formulate such a set of objectives.

Hariri and Salim agreed that that an action plan of common goals would facilitate lobbying for GoI action. Hariri undertook to meet this week with the other members of the Prime Ministers Minorities Committee to follow up on this idea, and promised a readout. (Note: The PM's Minorities Committee consists, along with Hariri and Salim, of PM Political Advisor Sadiq Rikabi, PM's Christian Affairs Advisor George Bakoos, MFA U/S Labid Abbawi, and Presidency Council Chairman Nasir al-Ani. End Note.)

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MFA's Christian Conference

16. (C) MFA Under Secretary for Policy Planning Labid Abbawi briefed poloffs on September 1 on the Christian Conference he is organizing and hopes to hold by the end of the year. He said the conference was conceived last spring in response to the alarming exodus of Iraqi Christians fleeing persecution and subsequent Western (primarily European) pressure on the GoI. The Conference's objectives are to:

-- demonstrate GoI concern for Iraqi Christians and to show the West what it is doing to protect them and further their interests;

-- underscore to Iraqis that Christians are an integral part of Iraqi society and that anti-Christian actions are detrimental to Iraqi unity; and

-- develop concrete, practical steps to address and follow up on Iraqi Christian concerns. Abbawi stressed the need to avoid a repeat of the disappearance of Iraq's thriving Jewish community in the fifties and sixties.

17. (C) Noting that PM Maliki had urged him to move quickly, Abbawi said the ad hoc planning committee (including Salim, George Bakoos from the Prime Minister's Office, parliamentarians, Council of Churches representatives, and MFA officials) will meet very soon to map out modalities for the conference. He had no objection in principle to U.S. support for the Christian conference, but deferred further consideration until after the planning committee meets and determines modalities. In response to poloff's query as to whether the scope of the conference could be expanded to include other minorities, Abbawi expressed willingness to consider addressing broader minority issues in a working group format during the conference, but insisted that the conference should be Christian focused. Christians are Iraq's largest minority community, he explained, and unlike Yezidis, Shabaks, and other minorities, Iraq's Christians have been stigmatized as being "lackeys" of the West and thus require greater advocacy. Abbawi stressed that such a

Christian Conference should precede any minorities conference, reiterating the special needs of Iraq's Christian community. He said U.S. ideas on a minorities conference/pre-conference and offer of assistance would be factored into his upcoming Christian conference planning meeting.

¶8. (C) Abbawi described the interfaith conference announced by PM Maliki following his visit with the Pope as a wholly different kind of meeting than, and totally separate from, the results-oriented Christian Conference.

Minorities Conference

¶9. (C) We have encountered a variety of views on the Washington-proposed minorities conference. All agree that a visibly USG-funded/organized minorities conference in Washington would not advance the cause of Iraqi Christians. Human Rights Minister Salim and Industry Minister Hariri warned that a visible American hand would raise suspicion immediately among Iraqi Muslims that the Iraqi Christians were acting as agents of American influence. Hariri, however, saw no harm in a privately organized minorities conference in Washington. Acknowledging Prime Minister Maliki's opposition to holding conferences about Iraq outside of Iraq, Hariri nonetheless predicted that Maliki would approve sending GoI representatives to such a conference if it were organized entirely privately. Salim reiterated her opposition to any conference or pre-conference in the U.S., claiming that Iraqi Christians already face persecution for not being loyal Iraqis; a U.S. conference would only serve to confirm anti-Christian Fifth Column suspicions.

¶10. (C) In our August 24 meeting, Prime Minister Maliki's Political Advisor Sadik Rikabi and PM aide George Bakoos strongly urged that no conference on minority or Christian issues be held in the U.S. The optics to most Iraqis would, they cautioned, be terrible. They did not oppose a GoI-hosted conference in Baghdad that focused on social and security issues affecting the Iraqi Christian community. Rikabi warned that any conference touching on Christian issues would be extremely sensitive among Iraqi Muslims, and such a conference could not touch on political issues. Both men were adamant that such a Baghdad conference should not be organized by an American NGO or be USG funded. They said foreigners could attend, but only as observers.

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Comment

¶11. (C) There are several threads here that when pulled could lead to a conference. There are also several themes that come through clearly from all our interlocutors. Foremost among those themes is the sensitivity of American involvement in organizing a conference about Christian community problems. In all of our recent conversations, we have underlined U.S. concern for the plight of Iraq's Christians and other minorities and the need for Iraqi policy responses. The most effective minorities conference will be one that takes place in Iraq and has strong buy-in from the GoI. Many, if not most, of the recommendations to come out of such a conference would require Iraqi government policy action. If the government's top circles perceived the conference from the start as hostile, the odds of getting buy-in for subsequent policy action would be tiny. Thus, the MFA-led conference (odd as it seems) may be our best lead to getting a conference organized in Iraq. We will of course follow up to learn the results of the MFA's initial Christian conference planning committee meeting. We will also follow up on Hariri's efforts to develop an economic and cultural

priorities action plan.
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